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INFO ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
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CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO  
DOD FOR OSD USDP EDELMAN, ASD LONG, AND DAS DKIMMITT

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN FOCUSES ON CABINET FORMATION AND  
LAF PRIORITIES WITH USDP EDELMAN

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary  
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11. (C) On May 31, President Michel Sleiman met with Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman in Baabda Palace and expressed his appreciation for the USG's support of Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). On the political front, he told us he wants to select the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Defense for two of the three cabinet seats allotted to him by the Doha agreement. "Both sides have said they want these seats, but I want to 'depoliticize' these important posts connected to the military and feel I am in the best position to do so." President Sleiman welcomed USDP Edelman's pledges for future support for both the LAF and ISF. He was pleased to learn from Edelman that the Bilateral Defense Committee (BDC) would begin later this year. He outlined the LAF's main strategic priorities, and spoke at length about the need to improve "quality of life" issues for Lebanese security forces. End Summary.

"I Want to Name the Defense and Interior Ministers"  
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12. (C) President Sleiman began by telling us about his consultations to form the new cabinet and said he would be meeting again with Prime Minister Siniora later that afternoon. Sleiman would like to name both the Defense and Interior Ministers in order to 'depoliticize' the positions and create a 'calmer' atmosphere. He didn't mention any ideas about the third seat he was entitled to name under the Doha agreement, clearly implying that he was willing to compromise in order to obtain two of the most influential cabinet seats. "This is what I want, but that doesn't mean I am going to get it," he said.

USG Ready to Move Forward on Defense Cooperation  
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13. (C) USDP Edelman complimented President Sleiman on his inauguration speech, which had been well-received in Washington. The speech presented a vision for the future with priority areas for national institutions that the USG would like to support. USDP Edelman said that Assistant Secretary of Defense Mary Beth Long would formally begin the Bilateral Defense Committee (BDC), which had been placed on hold during the presidential vacuum, later this year. The BDC will be a useful tool for both countries to begin defining a new national defense strategy for Lebanon. U/S Edelman also said that the Department of Defense, in cooperation with the Department of State, was looking at concrete ways to assist the Internal Security Forces (ISF),

as well as the LAF through possible 1207 funding. In terms of specific equipment requests, USDP Edelman mentioned the recent arrival of ammunition supplies, body armor that was being delivered on May 31, and the possibility of 110 HUMVEES and helicopters. USDP Edelman expressed his concerns about assuring proper maintenance and sustaining for Cobras, attack helicopters, citing problems experienced after the USG provided Cobras to Pakistan but acknowledged that he and his team would study the matter further and provide options to the GOL.

#### LAF's Strategic Priorities

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¶4. (C) Sleiman did not name any names to indicate his preferences for the new Defense Minister or LAF Commander. He did, however, outline what he believes are the LAF's main strategic goals:

-- External defense, with a focus on the southern border of Lebanon: "We must defend our sovereign territory and show that we can take on enemies who violate our country's boundaries with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and overflights. We must also put an end to the smuggling from both the land and the sea."

-- Terrorism: "We need precision weapons to help us attack terrorists who hide in heavily populated areas. The twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are highly armed and organized. Not all refugees are terrorists, but the terrorists are hiding behind the refugees. Precision weapons can help us to prevent the loss of innocent civilian lives. We don't need the latest generation of precision weapons, but we need a good generation."

-- Internal Security: "We need to increase the number of the LAF personnel from 50K up to 65-75K during this period of regional instability. We need these extra soldiers to help maintain non-violent control in times of civil disturbance. Once there is peace in the region, we can think about reducing the LAF back down to 'normal' numbers."

¶5. (C) Sleiman said that attack helicopters were needed to support all of these goals. The LAF has an urgent need to improve its mobility, transport its soldiers, and "follow the fight" if terrorists retreat into Lebanon's harsh mountain terrain.

¶6. (C) Sleiman is also determined that troop level be augmented at a gradual and sustainable level. He has studied the LAF's absorption rate carefully and believes that the LAF will need at least three years to fully integrate all new personnel. USDP Edelman said that the USG, in conjunction with other donor nations, would try to support this ambitious growth plan, which is estimated to cost approximately USD \$728 million.

#### Quality of Life Improvements for Lebanese Security Personnel

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¶7. (C) President Sleiman has great respect for the uniformed services of Lebanon. He said they support democracy and freedom, uphold human rights and want to fight terrorism. "However, we need to support them too." He said that the GOL needs to offer soldiers higher salaries and more benefits (health care, improved barracks, etc.) if it wants to attract a talented and multi-confessional force. It has become increasingly difficult to attract Christian, Shia and Druze recruits because of low salary levels. Sleiman also wants to improve the image of the LAF, saying that the prestige of the organization and pride in one's position will serve as powerful recruitment tools.

¶8. (U) USDP Edelman, ASD Long, CENTCOM J-5 Allardice, CDA Sison, DATT and Emboff joined the meeting in President Sleiman's office.

¶9. (U) USDP Edelman has cleared this message.

